

## Weekly Update

Friday, January 16, 2004

This Thursday, the Senate Committee on Aging, Families, Mental and Public Health approved the Children's Mental Health Reform Act, SB 1003, for debate. The decision came today after the committee heard unopposed testimony Wednesday on the bill, which bill will reform and reorganize children's mental health services.

We have the tremendous opportunity to right an incredible wrong with this bill. Parents are currently in an intolerable position where they are forced to choose between care that the Division of Family Services provides, but at the incredible cost of relinquishing custody of their children to the state.

According to Division of Family Services, nearly 600 children being treated for mental health in Missouri are currently in the custody of the state. Oftentimes when a parent relinquishes custody to the state in these matters, they are charged with abandonment and neglect.

Once custody is relinquished, a family has no right to decision-making in their child's treatment and no control over when custody will be returned to them. They have no active role in the lives of their child.

The committee heard testimony Wednesday from parents of children with mental illnesses and groups like Citizens for Missouri's Children, National Alliance for the Mentally Ill and the Department of Mental Health all in support of the measure.

Donna Uhlmansiek, a mother from St. Charles gave emotional testimony on her son and the different options they had tried, culminating in his placement in a new program in Marshall, Mo, where he was sexually abused by staff members.

"Had we gotten day care and respite service in the first place, we probably would not have put our son in Marshall, and he may have never been sexually assaulted," Uhlmansiek said. "One day we drove him to the Family Court and said 'Here, take him. We love him so much and we can't do anything for him.' We were charged with abandonment and neglect."

"We need to understand that it is hard for any family to access mental health in this state," Beth Griffin, from Citizens' for Missouri's Children, said. "This bill will weave together pieces of our system that serve children well. We are not creating anything new, we are trying to bring together good practices we already have. The state of Missouri knows how to do it."

"The Department of Mental Health strongly supports this legislation," Linda Roebuck of DMH said. "Children have so many needs and for a long time, children were bounced around through different

agencies. We expect all of the agencies to be at the table. These are Missouri's children, and they don't just belong to one department."

Beth Viviano, a mother from Fenton, testified to her daughter's story and said this bill would allow some order into a system she feels is in chaos.

"This bill is our only chance to maintain custody," Viviano said, "and I have fought too long and too hard to give up custody now."